

# Contesting Authoritarianism, Redefining Democracy: Youth and Citizenship in Contemporary India

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## Abstract

In December 2019, the majority Hindu nationalist government in India enacted a Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) that purported to give citizenship to persecuted religious minorities from India's neighbouring countries. But the act crucially did not include Muslims in the list of oppressed minorities and created widespread anxieties about the possible and intended loss of citizenship for them through the CAA and the National Register of Citizens. Millions of young people across Indian university campuses and neighbourhoods took to the streets to protest against the legislation. Drawing on the narratives of the young people who participated in these protests, this paper attempts to understand how youth in contemporary India perceives, experiences, and engages with the contestations around the ideas of citizenship and nation. It highlights the conceptions of and negotiations with one's identity and the use of different modes of resistance deployed in the anti-CAA movement. The paper concludes by laying out the implications of these youth protests as a mode of 'public pedagogy' for citizenship education (CE) as an alternative to the statist models of CE.

**Keywords:** Citizenship in India, Anti-CAA protests, Religious identity, Youth movement, Muslim, Public Pedagogy

## Introduction

Since the 1990s, India has seen a dangerous alliance of Hindutva, ultranationalism, and neoliberal extractivism, which has culminated in the rise of authoritarian populism (Kumbamu, Forthcoming). In view of these tectonic shifts, Appadurai (2019) warns that India has pioneered a model of citizenship where one's status as a citizen is no longer sufficient. The authoritarian nation-state demands 'statizens'. One is a citizen because they have been granted a state-certified document, as

stipulated by the ruling regime. Their territorial, familial, religious or natural roots in the country hold no value. The 'statizen' model of citizenship under the authoritarian populist regime means lining up with the Hindu Right. Since 2014 Modi's India has played a vital role in propagating a muscular, Hindu majoritarian view of citizenship (Zain, 2020). It divides citizens into a binary of who is worthy of the state protection and who is not.

Accordingly, on 11 December 2019, the central government in India enacted the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which purported to give citizenship to persecuted religious minorities in India's neighbouring countries. It mentions Hindus, Christians, Buddhists, Jains and Parsees and notably excludes Muslims. It is the link between the CAA with the National Register of Citizens that enables only non-Muslims to regain lost citizenship (Venkataramakrishnan, 2019). The NRC policy contains many violent dimensions: anti-Muslim violence, anti-migrant policies, extraordinary insensitivity towards marginalised and vulnerable populations that may not be able to meet the burden of documentary proof and armed control over states that adjoin neighbouring Muslim majority states (Appadurai, 2019). The state has also used technologies of governmentality to penetrate into every aspect of citizens and put those who dissent under panoptical incarceration.

The combination of the CAA-NRC created widespread anxieties about the possible and intended loss of citizenship for Muslims, creation of stateless subjects, communal polarisation, a shift from being a secular republic to Hindu *Rashtra* (Hindu nation), and expansion and legitimisation of coercive state power through the CAA and the National Register of Citizens (NRC) (Aaron, 2019; Ghose, 2019; Raina, 2019; Varadarajan, 2019). The CAA has exacerbated fears that Muslims will be rendered as 'second-class citizens' of India (Jaffrelot, 2019). Jaffrelot (2019) argues that over the past five years, India under Modi has moved towards this model of an ethnoreligious state, which renders Muslim citizens at the margins of India.

The legislation met with widespread opposition across India. Millions of youths took to the streets, neighbourhoods and university campuses across India to protest against the legislation. The Anti-CAA-NRC agitations took their most recognised

shape as peaceful daily mass sit-in protests, roughly in the period from November 2019 to late March 2020, when the Covid-19 lockdown brought the demonstrations to an abrupt halt. The study reported here was conducted between June and September 2020 with youth who participated in these protests.

Drawing on the narratives of youth participating in the anti-CAA protests in Delhi, the capital of India, this paper attempts to elaborate how a particular section of youth in the contemporary metropolitan context of India perceives, experiences and engages with contestations over ideas and meanings of citizenship and nation.

The article makes three contributions to the current scholarship on citizenship and youth movements in India. First, it provides first-hand narratives of youth participation in the anti-CAA-NRC protests. Secondly, it foregrounds these narratives to understand the vexing and intersecting questions of state, identity and citizenship. Thirdly, it questions the dominant statist conceptions of citizenship education to examine how dissent ruptures the hegemony of such discourses and offers possibilities for imagining alternative models of institution and nation-building and deepening democracy through a model of critical citizenship education.

This article is organised into four sections. The first section provides a historical background to the rise and politics of the BJP and Narendra Modi government, the youth movements that had emerged post-2014 when BJP took power in India, and current juncture to situate anti-CAA/NRC protests. Section two focuses on the methodology and describes the challenges for and process of data collection in the context of state repression. Two key themes emerged in the narratives and are discussed in the third section. The final concluding section discusses how the pedagogy of protest can challenge asymmetrical power relationships within civic and political spaces, and work for meaningful democratisation and citizenship education in practice.

## **Historical Background**

This section provides a historical background of the rise and politics of the BJP and the current Narendra Modi government. It explains the CAA and NRC legislation to situate anti-CAA/NRC protests.

The BJP government, led by Modi, is the political offshoot of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The RSS is rooted in the 'Hindutva' ideology, pioneered by V.D.Savarkar in 1925, and furthered through K.B.Hedgewar and M.S.Golwalkar - the founders of the RSS. The Hindutva ideology seeks to establish India as a 'Hindu Rashtra' (Hindu nation), which can only be achieved with the purging of its religious minorities (Ramachandran, 2020: 2). Golwalkar (1939) states,

*The non-Hindu people in Hindustan(India) must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and revere Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but the glorification of the Hindu nation.*

The political arm of Hindutva has become especially significant since the 1990s, the decade that saw the end of the Indian National Congress's dominance and the rise of the BJP (Anand 2011, p.3). Over the years their hegemonic discourses have generated new soft power structures, for example by replacing names of streets with Hindutva terminologies, rewriting 'officially' taught history in schools, and formulating controversial policies, which have promoted anxieties among sections of the population (see Mukherjee & Mukherjee, 2001). It is suggested that these steps have been taken to establish the hegemony of Hindutva through the engineering of political, cultural and legal organisations (See Berglund 2004; Hansen 1999; Kanungo 2014). All of these have resulted in an Islamophobic narrative with increasing cases of violence, and assault against the minority population, including instances of mob-lynching, extra-judicial killing, racial profiling and pogroms (Mander, 2015; Banaji, 2018). Moreover, it is argued that these injustices have persisted because they fit into the global Islamophobic script which gives it the support to continue unquestionably (Banaji, 2018; Kundnani, 2014; Doyle and Ahmad, 2017). Thus, the disenfranchisement of Muslims has become a mandatory

component in the propagation of Hindutva through the BJP's politics. The fears the CAA-NRC legislations stoked, were thus also related to the ideological character and actions of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government, which had returned to power in May 2019. The BJP, a Hindu nationalist party, had for the first time secured an electoral majority on its own in 2014, under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, marking a decisive moment in the history of democracy in India (Vanaik, 2017).

### The anti-CAA/NRC youth protests

In recent year, India has witnessed a dramatic upsurge in youth protest over the issues such as fee hikes, discrimination against women, Dalits, Adivasis and Muslims, and corruption (Thapar, 2015). The six years of the BJP government led by Modi, has witnessed several instances of student mobilisation in the context of increasing authoritarianism, attacks on religious minorities, redefinitions of citizenship and disconcerting shifts in the popular discourse on nationalism (Anderson & Jaffrelot, 2018). These instances have shaped new trajectories of resistance and political spaces, which have paved the way for the formation of new youth movements operating based on identity politics (Pathania, 2018). These youth movements have evolved mostly in campus spaces. They have contributed to shaping the debate on the broader questions of democracy that post-colonial states face in the age of neoliberalism. In 2014, the *Hok Kolorob* Movement emerged from Jadavpur University, questioning the power system that sustains violence across the university space (Chaudhari, 2019). Rohith Verma, a Dalit PhD student who committed suicide in 2015 on account of institutional discrimination and violence, led to widespread discontent among students and youth (Pathania 2018; Chattarji, 2019). Scholarship and social commentators have argued that such extensive student discontent is a consequence of neoliberal transformations in the Indian education sector (Mazumdar, 2019).

The anti-CAA/NRC protest was unprecedented as it contested the very ideas of India, secularism, democracy and citizenship. Against this backdrop, we seek to understand how the youth perceived, experienced and engaged with the contests over the ideas of citizenship and nation.

## **Research Methodology**

This research adopted an exploratory and interpretive methodological approach. It drew on first-hand experiences and narratives of the youth who participated in anti-CAA-NRC protests in India. As such, this study does not take into account those youth who participated in favour of CAA-NRC. We suggest canvassing of views and experiences of pro-CAA-NRC youth as a possible area of further research.

We interviewed ten youth who participated in significant anti-CAA/NRC protest sites in Delhi. These sites included Shaheen Bagh, the leading protest site led by especially Muslim women (Mustafa, 2019), Jamia Millia Islamia University, which is renowned for anti-colonial student protests in India (Qaiser, 2020) and one protest site in north-east Delhi. These urban metropolitan sites brought together anti-CAA/NRC inter-generational demonstrators from many parts of India, from a variety of religious orientations.

Three of the ten youth participated in a focus group discussion. The remaining seven youth were interviewed individually by one of the youth authors. The ten participants had varying levels of engagement in the protest (extensive, sporadic, regular). They identified themselves with three different religion affiliations (Muslim, Hindu, Sikh). They also hailed from diverse educational and socio-economic backgrounds (Table 1).

Given the increasing state repression, including arrests of anti-CAA-NRC protesters, we took several steps to ensure the safety of those who participated in the study. The issue of participant anonymity, anxieties and fears raised many political and ethical dilemmas. The “need for continuous reflection, dialogue and assessment of the vulnerability of research participants, and the process of securing consent” (Maglio & Pherali 2020: 14) was understood, and decisions around the same were taken accordingly. We decided to interview only those youth who were not at immediate risk (for example being on police watchlists or having a charge sheet filed against them). We accessed the interviewees using our existing personal networks for accounting for trust and circumstantial background. We chose to include people above 20 years of age so that they could make an informed decision based on the

interview questions and potential risks. They could decide to give written or verbal consent. The issues of anonymity, confidentiality and potential risks were discussed with all participants. Sensitive issues were avoided, and questions were tailored in dialogue with them. Strict standards of anonymity were maintained. Participant identifiers (name, location) and the recordings of the interview were retained by the person who conducted the interview, and only the anonymised transcribed data was shared with co-researchers. Following transcription, the tapes were destroyed. Information sheets filled in and interviews conducted (mostly in) Hindi or English, depending on the preference of the participant.

Similar anxieties and concerns about safety were experienced and discussed within the research team. We recognised ethical dilemmas and challenges regarding the emotional, geographical and social locations of the writers, and the sense of vulnerability and a fear of reprisal among all the co-authors. We decided to regularly check in with each other about our sense of safety and our comfort to participate in the project. We have also determined to be sensitive to political developments to the extent that the writing of this article will be withdrawn if required.

The data were thematically analysed through several rounds of individual and collective coding processes. The analysis focused on understanding how a pedagogy of protest can challenge asymmetrical power relationships within civic and political spaces and work for meaningful democratisation in practice.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

This paper describes two vital interrelated themes that emerged in the youth narratives of the anti-CAA protests: the feelings of fear, anxiety and insecurities over the possible loss of rights and citizenship for a significant population of India, especially, Muslims; and anti-CAA protests as a source of solidarity and political conscientization and an exercise in active citizenship. Participation in the protest not only imbued the protestors with strength in newfound solidarity, learning and hope in the collective resistance but also paved a way to realize their complex identities in times of crisis.



### ***Feelings of fear, anxiety and insecurity: loss of home and citizenship***

The anti-CAA protests appeared to resist the authoritarian politics of life and death enacted through the CAA-NRC legislations. In the 1970s, Foucault observed that states exercise sovereignty through ‘the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die’ (Mbembe, 2003, p. 11). In *necropolitics*, Mbembe (2003, p.39) expands Foucault’s notion of *biopower* to account for ‘contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death’. He speaks of ‘new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead’. The exercise of CAA-NRC within the Nazi-inspired Hindutva vision of citizenship has the potential to cause what Mbembe describes ‘dead worlds’ or ‘maximum destruction of populations’ (p.40). The CAA-NRC legislations appear to normalise division of populations into a binary of those in the words of Butler (2015), ‘whose lives are considered valuable...and whose lives are considered ungrievable’. The CAA-NRC are the new forms of governmentality that legitimate the state’s ‘right to kill’ in new ways. The right to kill is not only restricted to just actually killing people, but also to keep people in a permanent *state of injury* that they are alive but just enough to extract value from them, as was the case with slaves. Thus, it creates triple conditions of loss: loss of home, loss of political status and loss of rights over their bodies. (*Ibid.*)

Inevitably, a sense of insecurity, injustice and fear for their future, drove nearly all participants to protest against the CAA-NRC legislation. Participants recognised that the bill had the potential to affect legal recognition of Indian Muslims and thus render them stateless and strip them of their collective identity as Indians. The feeling of being under attack was particularly intense among the six youth participants who included being Muslim as one of the markers of their identity. Most participants feared that the law had the potential to affect marginalised social groups in the country regardless of their religious identity. Durga, 21, who was from a less privileged background and came from a rural area to study in Delhi, noted the implications of the CAA/NRC and general marginalization from benefits of citizenship rights of women, Adivasis, Dalits and other vulnerable social groups,



*They think it is only for Muslims or Dalits. Still, it is wrong for women. Also, people from different genders as well as... questions on the citizenship of Adivasis, women, Dalits would also be raised.*

Zeeshan, a university student, referred to Hindutva nationalism as a '*muscular Hindu nationalism which is clearly anti-Muslim and anti-Dalit*'. This finding is consistent with the broader marginalization of other non-Muslim social groups by the Hindutva ideology such as Dalits, Adivasis, women and LGBTQ+ community (Chatterji, Hansen & Jaffrelot, 2019).

Participants also felt anxious about citizenship as a prerequisite to claiming rights, security and a future in India. Sunita referred to a conversation between two women at one of the protest sites, '*If you live in this country, you have access to electricity and a water supply, and you can vote. This is citizenship*'. Thus, the legislation signified the potential loss of home and rights as citizens for Indian Muslims and socioeconomically marginalised social groups. For instance, Durga, and Nargis and Iftikar, who also came from socioeconomically marginalised backgrounds, feared '*losing families*', that their home may be '*snatched away from them*' and they could be '*sent to detention centres*'. The ongoing NRC fiasco in Assam, a state in northeast India, made them particularly wary. Sunita, a student activist, recalled how one female protestor at a protest site in a socioeconomically deprived area commented, '*If the family of Mr Fakruddin, a former President of India, was expelled then what chance do ordinary people like us have.*' Nargis, a young and unemployed single mother, worried,

*I was born here. My parents were born here. How can they ask us to go away from here if we have our houses here? What crime have we committed to being thrown into detention centres? When we won't have our homes, what would we do?*

These sentiments express a particular image of a future where one's '*home*' is taken away and replaced by a detention centre. In response, the participants questioned the legitimacy of the BJP, and its Hindutva project, by invoking the language of property ownership in ancestral terms to defy the top-down command to prove their

citizenship through poems such as *Kisi Ke Baap Ka Hindustan Thodi Hai* (India is not anyone's father's personal property) and *Hum Kagaz Nahi Dikhayenge* (We will not show you our identity papers).

Furthermore, the participants noted that hate politics had already extended into the day-to-day experiences of Muslims. Three respondents shared their experiences of being discriminated against in public spaces during the time of the protest itself. Sunita recalled conversations that highlighted the Islamophobic stigma faced daily by the people who were protesting, for example,

*A Hindu auto[rickshaw] driver refused a lady who was wearing a burqa. He made an excuse saying he is not going in that direction. But in a little while, when another person arrived who wanted to go to the same place, he let him sit in the auto[rickshaw] and drove off without saying a word.*

Such discrimination intruded on their friendships too. Zoya, who visited the protest site every day, expressed with grief,

*The people I studied with are mostly Hindus, as I learned in a private school and not an Islamic school. We had eaten food together ... (we drank) water from the same bottle. But now, when this issue came up... they moved apart after a 15-16 years' long friendship ... because they did not choose me, they chose religion over friendship... put provocative WhatsApp statuses like 'Ab aayega maza, ab hogi pitai' [Now we will enjoy, they (Muslims) are going to get beaten']. Their statuses were like they were enjoying this violence.*

However, these experiences of discrimination faced by Muslims, particularly women, in their everyday lives is not new in India. Kirmani's (2016) work reveals insecurities experienced by Indian Muslim women navigating intersecting identities of religion, region and class in the face of heightened Islamophobia in Delhi.

Nearly all participants viewed the CAA-NRC legislation as an insult to the very idea of India as a secular and democratic country as enshrined in its constitution. Consequently, the CAA was also seen as being against the people of India, as the constitution begins with the phrase: 'WE THE PEOPLE OF INDIA ...'. The idea that 'people' and 'nation' were inseparable ran across the interviews. The law was not just a threat to a particular religious group, or their home or family, but to the very spirit of the nation. Iftikar, 25, Indian Muslim male resident of an area of one of the protest sites in north-east Delhi, lamented, *'Our constitution is under attack ... I come from a particular community which was under attack ... our existence is under attack ... and we have to save it.'*

Repressive trends suggest a loss of political agency in contemporary India for people to dissent, even though Article 19 of the Indian constitution guarantees the right to freedom of expression and the right to peaceful assembly. Pro-BJP actors/networks and police institutions, as evidence from Shaheen Bagh, Jamia Millia Islamia, Jawaharlal Nehru University and elsewhere suggests, strongly condemned and vilified protesters. Deepti's recollection of *'listening to Yogi Adityanath [Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh] say 'Goli se maanenge' [They will only surrender/succumb to bullets]'* highlighted the role that prominent politicians played in inciting hatred and violence, including police brutality towards the non-violent protesters, many of whom were killed or injured. Several more have been arrested on charges that range from terrorism to threatening national security. The ghastliest episode of the repression of the political agency was the pogrom in north-east Delhi incited by some of the ministers of the current ruling party (Ellis-Petersen, 2020).

These developments have intensified the anxiety among the protesters. Zeeshan was worried by the state and media's delegitimization of protesters by *'calling them psychopaths, anti-national, Naxalite etc.'* This fear was so palpable that most respondents were reluctant to give written consent for our research. Nida, Durga, Sunita, Pankaj, Zoya and Zeeshan also reported that the state had created a climate of fear through screening and surveillance of protestors. Pankaj recalled the protest days,

*If you go to any protest site, you cannot see the police and say I am safe, because people have only encountered them with a lathi [baton] in their hands, beating students. We know that they are looking at us and they don't stand in solidarity, they stand against us.*

Thus, there was clearly a drift towards overall discouragement of political activity and the right to mobilize, and dissent.

Thus, overall, the participants noted the possibility of all four types of loss of citizenship for a significant Indian population that [Bosniak \(2000\)](#) describes. This include loss of legal status, loss of rights, loss of political agency and loss of collective identity as Indians, as a result of the implementation of the CAA and the NRC.

Nonetheless, the violence embedded in CAA-NRC encouraged many youths to come forward in solidarity. As described in the next section, protests resulted in greater political conscientization, solidarity and learning.

### ***A sense of growing, belonging and solidarity for justice***

The anti-CAA-NRC protests served as a form of 'public pedagogy', which Giroux (2011, p. 686) defines as education and learning that occurs beyond formal schooling. A common theme that resonated across our youth protesters was learning from figures, slogans, books, and various pedagogies of activism. The protest sites provided counter hegemonic dimensions to their learning that was distinct from their formal schooling. Youth protesters found themselves developing a sense of belonging and solidarity over issues that mattered to them, learning new information about their anti-colonial history and current situation, and developing confidence in a reasonably flexible and informal space, where they could exercise choice, autonomy and agency.

Our youth participants noted an enhanced political consciousness owing to their participation in the protests. The protest sites motivated them to learn, understand and politically mobilise themselves through 'speeches, discussions and book reading sessions' and engage in what they described as a 'cathartic and informative' dialogue with each other. Durga mentioned,

*In one corner speech was delivered, in another corner, a library was opened, and people were reading books, and yet at another corner sloganeering was taking place. So, I realised that on one issue many people can come together and do different things at a time. Things that were important in our daily lives like drawing, attending classes, sloganeering, painting all can be done in one place. I felt good. I also learnt a lot during this protest that was new to me.*

The participants described the sites as dialogic spaces which helped in the exchange of ideas and social interaction. Zeeshan saw his university's central canteen as a space for political identity formation. He said,

*It was a space for political dissent which was used for critical dialogues...amongst a lot of people coming from different social, cultural backgrounds...So actually this became a political space where not only students but also teachers held discussions with students on different sorts of problems that are pertaining in the country.*

In this sense, these protest spaces were akin to what Freire described as a 'pedagogy of the oppressed' (1972), which envisions a horizontal dialogue, exchange of ideas, and mutual learning. The pedagogy of protests appeared to support the youth participants to understand their lives better in the broader socio-cultural, political, economic context of India and the world. They were not passive learners but rather, active, creative, curious and critical agents in shaping the anti-CAA-NRC discourse. They questioned inequalities, prejudices, and discrimination and held the state accountable through their slogans, plays, poems, solidarity and learning. They used a range of pedagogic resources that included posters, storytelling, literature, speeches, songs, dance, music, autobiographies, photographs, humour, cartoons, documents, films, and other art forms. They engaged in these activities with a greater sense of autonomy and flexibility to accommodate their needs and preferences. Consequently, all participants expressed that they had a better grasp of the political discourse, and they felt inspired, empowered and confident.

Another consequence of participating in protest was the creation of a sense of solidarity. Recognition from their fellow protesters for their efforts also made them keep returning to the protest site. For instance, Zoya fondly recollected, *'I received a lot of love and affection from the aunties sitting there for my speeches. I started liking going to that place and then onwards, I went there daily for the next two months.'* Deepti, a Hindu respondent, received a lot of appreciation from fellow Muslim protesters after she represented the whole movement on a national news channel with others. She remembered how *'people used to see ... [her and say] 'Thank you for speaking for us'.* Similarly, Durga, who was initially hesitant to speak in public, gained confidence after she felt appreciated. She said with determination, *'we should do things that we consider right, people gradually join you'.* They also drew inspiration from each other's courage. Nargis beamed,

*When I see others with courage, I also gather the courage to go out and look for the reasons why other women and girls are sitting on dharna and what they are fighting against.*

The respondents also felt supported by many members of the broader community. Durga told us, *'Local people helped us in providing food, water and other types of support throughout the day on all days. Local people helped us a lot in providing daily needs'.* The protests showed the unity and determination of a significant number of people in the country against the Hindutva agenda of spreading hatred and division. The respondents noticed how people from across religions showed solidarity to the Muslim community and delivered the message of oneness.

However, these solidarities were not established without challenges and negotiations. As Iftikhar put it, *'Initially my family members stopped me, but gradually they understood'.* Women protestors were at the forefront of the struggle had to negotiate with their families, their presence in the public spaces, and with their educational institutions. A Muslim student activist, Nida, who identifies herself as a 'woke Muslim', expressed her challenges both as a student and as a woman as a protester. She had to miss her classes and strike a balance between her assignments, exams and protests.

*It wasn't that the administration was also with you. And there'd be several assignments and things that you have to study. And, you*

*know, just the submissions and then going out to protest and everything. So it was a little difficult for everybody who was protesting.*

Similarly, another bachelor's student, Durga, who was involved in the protests, also experienced a reluctance from parents in 'allowing' their daughter to stand with Muslims in the cause'. Moreover, her participation in protests was not well received by her teachers and classmates. Experience of Zoya and Nargis differed from that of Nida and Durga. Zoya expressed, *'Everyone encouraged me. My family members supported me a lot and said that I should go to the site.'* Similarly, Nargis, who is an unemployed, separated woman and lived in one of the protest sites, felt grateful that her family members supported her in participating in the protests. Her mother and other females of the household helped in taking care of her children and in taking equal responsibility in household chores while she was at the site. Moreover, she reflected how the impossible things like *'girls speaking in front of boys openly'* happened in the protests. She felt confident *'seeing women coming out of their spaces in front of the world and speaking, raising voices for the just and right thing'*. The protests, as Atif concluded, *'deconstructed the stereotypical image of Muslim women as the burqa-clad women in majoritarian politics'* and questioned *'the location of Muslim identity in the Orientalist perspective'*. Sunita also observed how some families saw the protest as a part of their daily life. She said,

*This was a complete family issue...So when a woman comes to the protest site, she goes back home and talks about it. Her children are giving speeches. Her husband is involved in it by helping her out (with household duties)...in households which have two or three daughters-in-law and the mother-in-law – they all take shifts in protesting, like who goes in the morning or in the evening. And what this has done is that it has changed the entire family's bonding.*

The anti-CAA women solidarity also helped negotiate their presence at the protest. For instance, Durga received support from her peer group, *'the easy part was (my fellow) students supported me a lot and stood with me in times of difficulty. We were all together.'* Sunita was thrilled to see such solidarity among women,



*Wow! I have never seen so many women together. ....[even at] eight o'clock in the evening, the protest site was filled with people. And so many women were sitting there with their children, young girls were handling the stage and mic. So I was really really impressed that this is something the country needs.*

This solidarity was also experienced along the lines of religion by Indian Muslim youth participants. Contrary to the BJP and the Hindutva forces which sought to vilify and discriminate against the Indian citizens by narrowing them down to singular identities as Muslims, these young people were in response using their religious identities as a source of strength, and to uphold a secular and democratic idea of India. Examples from Muslim history, stories and scripture were used to mobilise their resistance against what they saw as falsehood, oppression and tyranny. Nida said,

*I think a lot of it comes from following the religion... knowing that you are commanded as a Muslim to protect your brothers and sisters who are oppressed, fight against oppression itself. So the most significant motivation I had to go out, and protest was like the religion that I am following.*

The religion-based discourse surrounding the legislation also appeared to have made Hindu young people redefine their understanding of religion more consciously. For instance, Deepti said,

*So till now, I was never made to realise how much Hindu I am and I don't even want to realise this .... but I am just doing this for myself as a citizen. I do not want to live in a country ... which is very patriarchal Hindu.*

However, the accentuation of religious identities was not necessarily voluntary but it was invoked through the divisive political discourse. The situation has made participants such as Nida question whether one can be both a Muslim and a citizen of India as the mainstream public sphere remains dominated by the dominant caste Hindu discourse. Pankaj, from a Hindu background, on the other hand, said, *'I don't have to be a part of a university to feel this identity. I don't have to be unemployed,*

or a daily wage worker - I just have to be'. He felt forced to acknowledge his identity as Hindu though it was not a heightened aspect of his identity. He was made to think in binary terms that the Act was not against 'him' but against 'them' in various conversations.

Political dissent for young protesters was both a way to fight oppression and remain motivated towards the cause. The idea of standing against oppression and injustice, and standing with the oppressed and the attacked, was evident across the interviews. Zoya said,

*If somebody is doing wrong to us, we have to raise our voices against that wrongdoing. Even if the result of this struggle does not come in our favour, even then, we could show our next generation that we did not keep quiet, how could you?*

As we saw in the earlier section, the ruling party have used state institutions such as police, media and judiciary to crush political dissent, and to create a docile political subjectivity. The state has also used technologies of governmentality to penetrate into every aspect of citizens and put those who dissent under panoptical incarceration.

However, these repressive practices appeared to have a contrary effect for many anti-CAA protesters. For instance, some of those from non-Muslim backgrounds stood in solidarity with their fellow Muslim Indians upon hearing of police brutality against their fellow citizens. Deepti, a Hindu student activist, from Jamia Millia Islamia University, got involved in the protests after the police violence on her campus. She noted,

*After 15th [December] when the police entered our university, and a lot of police brutality and incidents happened ... and of course I made a representation at 'Prime Time' with Ravish Kumar' which is basically when the scene started and my involvement with the protest began.*

Similar observations were made by Pankaj, who resisted the divisiveness of the politics of hate and violence in the discourse promoted by the BJP and the Hindutva actors and therefore, saw it as his duty to oppose the situation,

*The loudest stories that we are hearing in these times is that there are...minorities, these are the terrible people. They are bad people in their morality, in their actions, in whatever they do. They are planning and plotting – this is the loudest story in the country – be it in the media or in our homes. So ... holding a preamble, singing the national anthem, song .... we are in solidarity with all these ideas of Indian-ness.*

The anti-CAA protesters from various religious backgrounds appeared to stand in solidarity with each other also on what they also saw as on the grounds of humanity, shared culture, respect for diversity, interconnections and to defend India's secular Constitution. Zeeshan, a 25-year old Muslim student and poet, said,

*The law [is]... not only against Muslims, but it is actually an attack on the concept of democracy and on the principles of the Constitution... actually an attack, a fascist attack, on the diversity of the country, on the secularism of the state, and on the unity that the country stands for.*

All youth participants viewed the BJP-Hindutva efforts as undermining the secular Constitution and claimed that their very idea of being an Indian citizen was under attack. The identification of themselves as responsible citizens is evident in their interviews. Durga said, *'I thought if they are fighting for their rights, I should also fight for my right, for my citizenship, that is why I also came forward'*. There was a sense of defending the Constitution, community and secular nation as a duty and experiencing a feeling of liberation in the process. Iftikhar claimed, *'we are a citizen of this nation by the constitution, and it is our responsibility to save the constitution'*. Similarly, Atif mentioned the use of *'national anthem and national flag in the Shaheen Bagh and Jamia, was because the people are asserting their Indian identity with their Muslim identity'*. He further mentioned, *'if we go outside India, we will be called Indian, not Muslims'*.

Their participation in the protest not only imbued the protestors with strength and newfound solidarity, learning and hope in the collective resistance but also paved a way to realise their interconnected identities in times of crisis.

## **Conclusion and implications for citizenship education**

The protests as a form of public pedagogy promoted an idea of citizenship that differed from those advanced by what Kadiwal and Jain (2020) describe as elitist, colonial and conventional frameworks of civic or citizenship education in India. The mainstream citizenship and civics textbooks, as Batra (2007) and Yadav (2007) note discourage criticality and critique of state policies. Instead, they ask for citizen's cooperation as disciplined citizens (Pathak 2002). Madan (2003) has also noted that civics textbooks hardly discuss the idea of democracy, reducing it to a bureaucratic study of elections and the government apparatus. Also, citizenship education is alienated from the real-world politics and everyday experience of state and citizenship (Kadiwal and Jain, 2020). The Indian civics textbooks, especially introduced under the coalition government of BJP in early 2000, emphasise following rules over autonomy and duty over rights (Bhog et al., 2009). The civic and citizenship education also seeks to produce loyal and obedient national citizens, as opposed to critical citizens, who can question the claims of ruling elites and the state (Kadiwal and Jain, 2020).

Contrary to the state-determined citizenship education models run in schools, the protests became sites for critical and transformative conversations and practices, led by young people. They showed the possibility of creative, critical and transformative approaches to civic and citizenship education. They advocated an active role of citizens in the transformation of the political, economic, and socio-cultural structural inequalities. The anti-CAA-NRC protesters challenged the idea of citizenship that focused on the production of docile subjectivities. They aimed to transform the broader conditions involving political and civil liberties, redistribution of economic resources, recognition of diversity, and reconciliation and healing between divided communities as the findings suggest. In this "activist" sense of civic education, they did not view the state as a benign actor. They practised a mode of public civic education that focused on questioning, debating, and taking individual and collective social action to change systems of dominance.

The youth participants' responses also differ from the mainstream global models of citizenship that privilege market-based conception of youth as consumer-citizens, primarily driven by the neoliberal ideology of the market (Stein 2015). In contrast to the view of entrepreneurial global citizens, who are expected to blindly follow the notions of international competition, the free market, human capital, and privatisation and fit in as a competitive worker within the global economy (Andreotti 2016), the youth in this study engaged in more emancipatory forms of citizenship education that stands against the perpetuation of unequal power relations, bigotry, racism, and discriminatory politics of hate and division. This practice was rooted in action, which resonated with Freire's (1980) praxis that combines 'reflection and action' (p.85). The protests, thus, served as sites for developing a greater political consciousness, solidarity against injustice and anti-oppressive practices.

The most significant implication for citizenship education that emerges out of the anti-CAA-NRC youth protests is the very idea of citizenship in the context of authoritarian populism. In Modi's India, a loyal citizen is the one who can "liberate" the country from an age-old inefficient liberal democratic politics and install "truly patriotic" Hindutva' (Kumbamu, Forthcoming). The educational policies introduced under the BJP rule envision cultural identity as static and not "as a hybrid, fractured, shifting, and political" (Balagopalan 2009). They also do not challenge gender stereotypes in textbooks under the name of tradition and history (Bhog and Ghose 2014). The BJP-Hindutva propaganda also reproduces the colonial discourse of mutually antagonistic religions and nations of Hindu and Muslims (Kadiwal and Jain, 2020).

In contrast, the youth in our study were standing up for a more pluralistic, diverse, anti-supremacist, and egalitarian vision of citizenship. The youths viewed India as a diverse and religiously pluralistic liberal democracy united by a shared history. While the BJP-Hindutva alliance has increasingly sought to roll out a rightist revision of history and an authoritarian, and neoliberal moral order (Roy 2003; Thapan 2000), the young people used the protest as a pedagogy for public debate and contested narratives of history and identities. The youth participants used their civic agency to read and, know more and learn to challenge the colonial 'divide and rule' legislations that intend to achieve hegemonic dominance. Thus, the public pedagogy of protests

seemed to do what Giroux (2011) has noted: help students recognise authoritarian tendencies, understand the relationship between knowledge and power and take constructive action. Protests emerged as historically significant public pedagogy to counter the Hindu Right's efforts to redefine the terms of belonging to "national culture" along religious lines with bureaucratic documentation to prove one's citizenship. Protests are also crucial to countering the identity-based violence against Dalits, Adivasis, and Muslims from becoming routine and a new normal. In this sense, these youths protesters show a new form of public sphere-based citizenship education that is essential to peaceful, egalitarian and a democratic social life. To conclude, in the voices of the young people interviewed, one of our participants Pankaj mentioned:

*Now that I think of the whole experience, I think of my participation as a 'lived and 'practised expression of liberation. It was 'practising' dialogue and dissent, not just talking about it, not reading about it, but actually doing it. It reminds me of something I read which was something like, 'A man asked a bird, 'what is freedom', and in response, the bird just flew into the vast blue sky.'*

*We were the birds.*

We will end with Nida's reflection on what she learned:

*It taught the larger audience to... disagree with the government... people have a notion that everything the government does, you're supposed to agree with. Even if you disagree with it, just follow it through...It has also made (the general public and politicians) realise not to come too strong in targeting Muslims because they know that we can fight back. I think that is the main reason they are arresting activists to break the spirit.*

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